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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAMAKO 000888

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TAGS: PTER PINS PINR ML

SUBJECT: THE LIBERATION OF AQIM'S AUSTRIAN HOSTAGES: AN  
INSIDE VIEW

REF: A. BAMAKO 00870  
    B. BAMAKO 00675

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: On November 12, National Assembly Deputy Ibrahim Mohamed Asselah described to the Embassy how he helped engineer the October 31 liberation of the two Austrian tourists captured in February 2008 by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). According to Asselah, he and several other northern leaders spent five months criss-crossing some of the most remote and inhospitable areas of northern Mali as part of a Malian government outreach operation designed to encourage local nomadic populations to pressure AQIM for Andrea Kloiber and Wolfgang Ebner's release. Asselah said he never spoke directly with AQIM and denied rumors circulating amongst Malian Tuaregs that he served as a conduit for a multi-million euro ransom payment (Ref. A). "Maybe there was a transaction," said Asselah, "but not in Mali." He said direct talks with AQIM were conducted by Mahmoud ag Mohamed, a Tuareg based near In-Khalil along the Mali-Algerian border, and attributed the hostages' liberation to a confluence of three factors: Kloiber and Ebner's apparent "conversion" to Islam, local nomadic populations' fear of being "collateral damage" were Mali or Algeria to take military action against AQIM, and President Amadou Toumani Toure's reputation as a peace-maker. Asselah said the nomadic leaders responsible for resolving the hostage crisis asked for nothing in return, other than more wells. "I reported this to President Toure," said Asselah, "but I'm sure they will never get anything."  
End Summary.

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A Malian Psy-Ops Campaign?

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2.(C) On November 12 the Embassy met with Deputy Ibrahim Mohamed Asselah to discuss his role in resolving the Austrian hostage crisis in northern Mali. Asselah is an Idnane Tuareg from Bourem in the region of Gao who was elected to the National Assembly in July 2007, where he is vice-president of the committee on defense and security. On August 24, 2008, Asselah and former government Minister Mohamed ag Erlaf secured the release of three Malian gendarmes taken prisoner on July 19 by small group of disgruntled Tuareg rebels in the northern town of Tessalit (Ref. B).

3.(C) According to Asselah, the Malian government deployed an apparently well-planned and well-executed public information campaign, targeting nomadic populations in one of the most remote and inhospitable parts of the world, to secure Kloiber and Ebner's release. Asselah said the plan, which was closely coordinated with Malian intelligence officials, traded on President Amadou ToQani Toure's reputation for peace-building and local nomads' fear of being caught in the cross-fire of a potential military solution to the hostage crisis. Asselah said he and a handful of other northern leaders spent five months, from June to October, criss-crossing northern Mali to discuss the hostage crisis

with the leaders of various nomadic communities living in geographic proximity to AQIM. These travels took Asselah from water points north-west of Taoudenni, where he met with Rugibat or "Polisario" from western Sahara, through the Timitrine (roughly the empty space between Taoudenni and Kidal), to the predominately Tuareg town of In-Khalil on Mali's north-eastern border with Algeria.

4.(C) At each stop, Asselah delivered the same demarche: the hostage crisis is putting nomadic communities in danger, and when the Malian or Algerian militaries decide to take action, they will not be able to differentiate between an innocent nomad and a member of AQIM. Asselah then urged nomadic leaders to increase pressure on AQIM to release Kloiber and Ebner, arguing that the hostage crisis was morphing into a "question of respect" for local inhabitants now that AQIM was putting nomadic populations at risk. He stressed that none of the nomadic groups he encountered harbored any religious or ideological affinities for AQIM. He said any ties between Malian nomads and AQIM were a function of their geographic proximity and described a system of mutual reliance, with nomadic groups sharing water holes with AQIM and trading provisions and supplies for security and other services otherwise unavailable. "There is nothing up there," said Asselah of the areas he visited, "no army, no development, no security, no services. Everyone has to fend for himself."

5.(C) Asselah said he did not knowingly meet with any AQIM members and that much of the direct talks between nomad groups and AQIM passed through Mahmoud ag Mohamed, an Idnane Tuareg based north of Kidal near In-Khalil. While he claimed to have met no AQIM members, Asselah said his understanding was that there were no Malian Tuaregs among AQIM's ranks and that non-Algerian members hailed from Mauritania and Nigeria, but some Malian Arabs could be mixed in as well. He said divisions within AQIM complicated efforts to negotiate as the two Austrians were held by the AQIM faction led by Yahia Djouadi, as opposed to another AQIM group loyal to Benlawar (Moctar Bel Moctar).

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Religion and Politics  
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6.(C) Two other factors, in addition to increased local pressure from nomadic communities, apparently contributed to Kloiber and Ebner's release. Asselah said the Austrians' conversion to Islam, whether real or feigned, eliminated AQIM's reasoning for holding them and strengthened local arguments advocating for their release. During a separate November 12 meeting, another Tuareg leader from Bourem who is reportedly close to President Toure, Azaz ag Doudagdag, also told the Embassy that Kloiber and Ebner's conversion to Islam had facilitated their release. Azaz claimed that the two memorized most of the Koran during their nine months in captivity.

7.(C) The other important factor facilitating the hostages' release, according to Asselah, was President Toure's reputation as a peace-maker. Asselah contrasted President Toure's response to instability in northern Mali with that of President Tandja's more militant response in neighboring Niger, and said that individuals in northern Mali, including apparently AQIM, regard Toure as a well-intentioned, good-faith negotiator.

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And The Nomads?  
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8.(C) Asselah said the nomadic leaders who played a key role in convincing AQIM to release Kloiber and Ebner never asked him for anything beyond more wells for their communities and animals. He said he relayed this request directly to President Toure, but said he was sure the nomadic groups would never receive these wells. "What I saw," said Asselah, "scares me. The government is too absent; there is no infrastructure. We need to take care of these communities so

that they feel they are part of the nation. I told this to the Malian authorities."

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Comment: Assessing Asselah  
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9.(C) Asselah's description of Malian efforts to turn local nomadic populations against AQIM makes for a compelling narrative. Without corroborating information, however, it is difficult to discern the accuracy of his portrayal. His description of northern Malians' commercial, as opposed to religious or ideological, ties to AQIM fits with our own observations of trends in northern Mali. Asselah did promise to provide his list of northern encampments in need of wells, although this list will likely be watered down with requests from villages within his own constituency of Bourem.

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